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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000930

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA
DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR ECA/PE/V/M - M. LANGE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/24/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE ALLOWS FIRST POLITICAL FILM SINCE 1998

REF: A. 08 SINGAPORE 1289

[1](#)B. SINGAPORE 68

[1](#)C. STATE 98916

Classified By: E/P Counselor Joel Ehrendreich for reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In the first ruling of its kind under Singapore's recently amended Films Act, film censors have reversed a ban on "Singapore Rebel," a film by Martyn See about opposition politician Chee Soon Juan. In rating the film, however, authorities prohibited its exhibition to anyone under 18. See said he was neither elated by the film's approval nor concerned about the restrictive rating, because the film has already been viewed thousands of times on the Internet. Meanwhile, "Zahari's 17 Years" - a film by See about a former political prisoner - remains banned as an alleged threat to the public interest, though it is also freely available to Singaporeans on line. See and a like-minded activist/filmmaker are separately probing the new boundaries of Singapore censorship by challenging the ban on "Zahari's 17 Years" and by seeking approval for a new film about a controversial political figure. End summary.

Censors Approve Film About Opposition Leader - Adults Only!

[1](#)2. (C) Singapore's Board of Film Censors (BFC) has reversed a four-year ban on a political film in the first ruling of its kind under Singapore's recently amended Films Act. Filmmaker Martyn See first submitted "Singapore Rebel," a short film about opposition Singapore Democratic Party leader Chee Soon Juan, for approval in 2005. At that time, it was a criminal offense for anyone except the government to make a political film. "Singapore Rebel" was banned, and police subjected See to a 15-month investigation, including confiscation of some of his filmmaking equipment. Despite the ban, interested Singaporeans could easily view the film on Internet sites such as YouTube, and See told PolOff he estimates that thousands of people have watched it in that format since 2005.

[1](#)3. (C) After the government amended the Films Act in March 2009 (previewed in reftel B), See resubmitted "Singapore Rebel" to the censors. Earlier this month, the BFC accepted the newly-formed Political Films Consultative Committee's recommendation that the film be permitted under the amended law as a documentary that does not depict persons or events "in a dramatic way." However, the BFC also rated the film "M18," meaning that it may not be shown to anyone under 18. (Comment: The government did not explain the rating, which has previously applied to commercial films with scenes of sex or violence -- neither of which appears in "Singapore Rebel" -- but it may be due to scenes of Dr. Chee engaging in peaceful acts of civil disobedience. End comment.) See told PolOff he was not elated by the approval or worried about the restrictive rating because the film has been and will continue to be readily accessible on line. See added that he believes the BFC approved his film partly because it is also

evaluating a political film submitted by Young PAP, the ruling People's Action Party's youth wing, and does not want to subject itself to ridicule by approving the Young PAP film while continuing to ban "Singapore Rebel."

Other Political Films Remain Banned

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¶4. (SBU) Though the approval of "Singapore Rebel" is one step toward allowing independent political films, other bans remain in effect. Another film by See, "Zahari's 17 Years," features an extended interview with Said Zahari, a former journalist whom Singapore authorities arrested as an alleged communist conspirator and detained without trial from 1963 to ¶1979. Singapore's communications minister banned that film, without explanation, as "contrary to the public interest" - a catch-all provision of the Films Act left untouched by the recent amendment. In addition, the BFC has refused to classify a polemical film by local activist Seelan Palay entitled "One Nation Under Lee," ostensibly because that film incorporates clips from the banned "Zahari's 17 Years." Singaporeans can watch both films on the Internet.

Activist Filmmakers Move to Test Revised Law

¶5. (SBU) On September 22, See wrote to Acting Communications Minister Lui Tuck Yew to challenge the continuing ban on "Zahari's 17 Years." See noted that "Men in White," a new book about the People's Action Party's early years published with tacit government approval and heavy promotion by the government-influenced Straits Times newspaper, features

SINGAPORE 00000930 002 OF 002

material drawn from extensive interviews with former leftist political detainees. See argued that if "Men in White" is not contrary to the public interest, neither is "Zahari's 17 Years." Lui has discretion to maintain or reverse the ban. See has not yet received a reply.

¶6. (SBU) Immediately after the BFC approved "Singapore Rebel," Seelan Palay submitted a new film, "Francis Seow: The Interview," to test the boundaries under the revised Films Act. The film features interview footage of Seow, a former Singapore solicitor general who was detained and allegedly subjected to harsh interrogation techniques in the late 1980s after Lee Kuan Yew's government accused him of taking money from the U.S. Government to lead political opposition to the People's Action Party. (Singapore also expelled an American diplomat, Hank Hendrickson, in that episode.) Seow lives in self-imposed exile in the United States. According to Seelan Palay, the BFC insisted that "Francis Seow: The Interview" be submitted as a political film and will refer it to the Political Films Consultative Committee for a recommendation as to its lawfulness.

Martyn See Approved for IVLP Program This January

¶7. (U) Martyn See has received approval to participate in a FY-10 Multi-Regional Project entitled "Film in the U.S." subject to funding availability (reftel C). If the program proceeds as scheduled, See will likely visit Washington during the week of January 11, 2010. Post is gratified by the approval of this nomination and pleased that See, who makes his living as a video editor and has never been to the United States, will have the chance to participate.

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